

A MEMORY OF THE CAVES-SANCTUARIES IN BULGARIA

IN MEMORY OF GEORGE ANTONOV

LES GROTTES – SANCTUAIRES EN BULGARIE

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Abstract

The work summarizes the published up to now data about caves in the Bulgarian lands, used as sanctuaries from the Neolithic period (6000 millennium B.C.) to recent days. Here are presented caves-shrines, where have been worshipped Greek, Thracian-Frigian, Roman deities and practiced cults of Christian and Islam saints.

The most ancient cave sanctuaries are situated in caves near the villages Baylovo, and Lipnitsa Sofia District and date back to the Early Neolithic period. According to the recent studies, these shrines are dedicated to a cult of the Moon. In the caves-shrines from the antiquity were worshipped Greek-Thracian deities - Heros, Asklepios, Artemis, Sabazii, Hekata, Bendida and the nymphs. In caves in East Rhodopi mountains - (South Bulgaria) and North-East Dobrudza - (North-East Bulgaria) were practiced cults of the dead and the Thracian Heros. The people believe that the water of some caves has medicinal power and after drinking or washing, it will improve and protect their health.

The article describes also caves – places for practicing of cults belonging to various religions, gives a description of the known ritual practices in the caves-sanctuaries and makes an attempt to explain their meaning.

Key words: *sacred caves, cults, Bulgaria, sanctuaries, ethnology*

Résumé

L'article passe en revue les données publiées jusqu'à présent concernant les grottes des terres bulgares, utilisées comme sanctuaires dès le Néolithique (6000 B.C.). Des grottes - autels consacrées aux dieux Grécques, Thraco-Frigiens et Romains, et aussi des lieux de cultes pour les saints Chrétiens ou Islamiques sont décrites.

Les grottes - sanctuaires les plus anciennes sont situées près des villages Baylovo et Lipnitsa (District de Sofia) et datent du début de la période Néolithique. Les études récentes indiquent que ces autels ont été dédiés au culte de la Lune. Dans l'Antiquité dans les grottes – autels ont été glorifiées les déités Gréco-Thraces - Heros, Asklepios, Artemis, Sabaz, Hekata, Bendida et les nymphes. Dans les grottes des Rhodopes Orientales (Bulgarie du Sud) et de Dobroudja (Bulgarie du Nord-Est) ont eu lieu les cultes des morts et de l'Heros thracien. Le gens pensent que l'eau dans certaines grottes a une force médicale et que si l'on boit ou se lave de telle eau ce serait bon pour la santé.

L'article décrit aussi des grottes – lieux de cultes des religions diverses, décrits sont aussi les rites pratiqués dans les grottes-sanctuaires et on s'efforce de trouver l'explication de leur signification.

Mots-clés: grottes sanctuaires, cultes, Bulgarie.

1.Introduction

The worshipping and using of the natural caves (the practice of speleoatria), as a special places for religious ceremonies is closely connected to the religion in general and begins from the Paleolithic epoch ILIADE (1997).

The studying of the acts of the cult of the caves is an important interdisciplinary problem, undeservedly ignored by researchers up to now. The most of the available information is fragmentary and is not enough for broader and overall characteristic of the speleoatria around the world and its development through the human history.

This article makes an attempt to summarize the available data about the speleoatria on the territory of Bulgaria.

2. The Cave sanctuaries – distinctive features

The choice of caves by men for places for cult ceremonies is determined by the combination of complex natural components with strong influence over the mystical conception of the world by the man ANTONOV (1981). In all cases, the darkness or the obscurity, are among the most important factors for this choice. The archaeological evidences show, that the religious rituals took place first in the inner, difficult to access halls and galleries of the caves (Magura, Vidin region – Northwest

Bulgaria) and during the subsequent epochs – in their entrance parts.

The cave researches offered a number of criteria to distinct the caves-sanctuaries from the temporary cave shelters – difficult access (narrow and low galleries), the presence of ceramic vessels, their fragments or votives; leaking, running or fluent water; cave formations that resemble altars, saints, animals, genitals (falos, vulva); consecrated and idol plastic, etc.

Here should be added the caves with cult drawings and engravings and these with where are found deliberately ordered bones (in most cases – skulls) of sacrificial animals. To the caves-sanctuaries belong also these used for inhumation (cave burial), ritual stay (incubation) and the pits – ritual altars.

Here is necessary to state, that sometimes the caves are not independent cult sites, but a centre or a part of bigger sanctuary complexes (East Rhodope Mt., Tzarevets vill. Vratza distr., Baylovo vill., Sofia distr.).

At later stage of religious development in general and in the Bulgarian lands, begins the building of cult building under the ground – artificially cut in the rocks chapels, churches and monasteries, partly co-existing with the natural caves-sanctuaries. During the process of building of these cult works, the constructors used every opportunity to reshape, enlarge and boxing off of the natural caves. In Bulgaria, mostly in the north-east part of the country, are known more than 1000 of such objects.

After this particularization of the origin of the underground sanctuaries, here we understand “a cave-sanctuary” as a natural underground vesicle, where people used to practice or still practicing cult rituals.

3.Cave sanctuaries in the Bulgarian lands

The most ancient caves-sanctuaries

The most ancient caves-sanctuaries in the Bulgarian lands are situated in North-west and South-east Bulgaria, but concentration is higher in the east part of the Rhodopi Mt. Here we will consider the sites according to their dating in chronological order.

The earliest sites (Early Neolithic epoch) are the rock-caves sanctuaries near the villages Baylovo and Lipnitsa, Sofia region STOYCHEV (1998). According to their explorers, at first these sanctuaries are connected to the cult of the Moon. Later, the function of these sites was enlarged and they turn into observatories for surveillance of the movement and the metamorphoses of the shape of the Moon. The practical importance to use these data for many purposes arises to the necessity to store this information as a calendar or temporal records. That is why, the initiated (probably priests), by using different techniques, have drawn the changes on the cave walls and around their entrances. As an evidence for this can be shown the numerous known cut, contour and bas-relief signs of the phases of the Moon in the caves.

Based on data from the excavations and analysis of the several rock gravures, MUGLOVA *et. al.* (1997) and PIEKOV (1999) the cave Topchika, near vill. Dobrostan, Plovdiv district, is also dated back to the Neolithic epoch.

Vill. Tzarevets, Vratza district is also known with hundreds of graffiti, cut into the cave complexes in the nearby places Srednia kamak and Govedarnika. Some of theses graffiti, recognized as astral signs, are dated back to the Neolithic epoch STOYCHEV (1998) and author states, that they are temporal and calendar records of the phases of the Moon and the Sun. The numerous astral

signs and symbols, dated back to the Middle ages (suns, moons, stars, dears, swastikas) show that the cult and practical importance of the Heaven's objects has “survived” during the time, which again shows their religious importance.

Of special interest is the sanctuary in the cave Tangardak Kaya, near vill. Ilinitza, Kurdzali district, which “could be related to the practicing of the cult of the Great Mother-Goddess – once a year the sun ray penetrates in the altar, representing her sacred marriage with the Sun” STOEVA *et al.* (2004). Attention deserve also the caves-sanctuaries, mentioned in RADUNCHEVA (2002) and generally dated back to the Chalcolithic age. Probably the most impressive is the cave in the place Koshcha near the town of Momchilgrad. On the left side of its entrance are cut the silhouettes of four lying figures - two marble Chalcolithic idols, a flat bone idol, and fourth one idol of an adult man with hair. On the wall of another cave in the same district “is cut a low altar and above it is drawn a “mature sun”, known from the relief in a temple, situated in the cult complex near vill. Dolnoslav”.

Beyond doubt, the most important cave-sanctuary from the prehistoric period is the cave Magurata near vill. Rabisha. with its unique monochromic painting. The archaeological explorations of this site date it back to the late epoch STOYCHEV (1994). The present profound studies of the unique monochromic painting of the cave STOYCHEV&GERASIMOVA(1993) reveal, that there are drawn itifalical scenes, which “give information about the religion, mythology, cults, divine reincarnations and rituals, the mysteries of the local people for a long period of time”. One of the two natural small caves next to vill. Dolna Chobanka in the place Harman kaya, is the unifying center of the homonymous sanctuary complex. The prolonged archaeological and arheoastronomical studies of the complex show its cult function. Here took place observations on the sun, which according to STOEVA *et.al* (2003) “have been included in the ritual practices of that time, when the cult of the God-Sun was widespread and all religious rites on the high rock probably were though as cosmostructuring activity: actions that overtake the chaos and ensure fertility”. According to the explorers, the sanctuary probably appeared during the late Chalcolithic period and functioned up to 1-2 century A. D.

Caves-sanctuaries from the Antiquity

The existing studies show that the sanctuaries from the Antiquity are big in number. The most definite proof for the sanctuary character of these caves are the found there artifacts with cult purpose – votive plates of Greek-Roman deities Heros, Asklepii, Artemida, Sabasii, Hekate, Bendida, the nymphs and Frigian goddess Kibela (The Great Mother of Goddess). According to the researchers, some of the caves in the East Rhodopi Mountains KOLEV (1983) and the caves in Silistra region TODOROV (1989) are sanctuaries, related to the cult of the dead and the Thracian deity Heros.

The available data show that a part of the sanctuaries have preserved their sacred functions from the Antiquity up to the end 19 C. These are the objects – the Great cave near vill. Madara, the cave near the peak Petrov krast, Chepan Mt., The Cave near Zlatna Panega vill., the Cave near Monastery St. Ivan Pusti, Devetasha cave, Zhivata voda, Montana region, etc., which until recently were used as holy springs. There were practiced rituals

related to different Christian feasts. In the centre of the rituals is put the drinking and washing with the healing cave water, but also the incubation – a curative staying overnight in or around the entrance of the cave. In almost all cases are observed offerings – leaving of objects, clothes and parts of clothes, foods, etc.



Fig.1. The cave sanctuary of Kibela, Durankulak vill., Dobrich District, NE Bulgaria (IV-I C B.C)

Caves – Holy Springs

They are about 1/3 of the known caves-sanctuaries. This is seen as a confirmation of the well-known ethnographic fact that among all types of magic, the medicinal is the steadiest TOKAREV (1959). That is why in these caves have been practiced rituals, which aim to improve or preserve the health of the believers, basically after drinking or washing with the healing water. In all cases at the holy springs were left food, different objects, parts of clothes, red cloths and thread, etc. In the caves-holy springs in the Strandzha Mt. like “St. Marina” near vill Slivarovo and vill. Stoilovo appears one different, probably archaic, ritual – to leave for health votives, made of thin silver or iron sheets – “obrutzi”- votves (which represent the ill organs, part of a body or a whole human figure).

The incubation near the caves-holy springs is also not rare. In ethnic aspect is interesting the cave near the Stone (Birds’) troughs (Tash Yalak – Kush Yalak), which used to be a sanctuary where were practiced rituals, related to Hurdlez (Sant George’s Day) and Ali (ST. Ilia’s Day). A perfect illustration of the interaction among the manifestations of the cult life of people from different ages is the cave Skalnica kladenetz (The Rock Well) near vill. Stareishino in East Rhodopes, which was antique, Christian and Muslim sanctuary NIKOLCHOVSKA (2002). The permanent “usage” of Kaya Bunar shows that here several times are inherited the functions of important vow from the antiquity times.

Identical is the picture with the cave near Ptichite korita (The Bird’s Troughs). The researcher of the cave IVANOV (2005) dates back the period of the initial rise and functioning of the sanctuary in wide bounds (from the Antiquity to the Mediaeval times) and concludes that here have been practiced rituals, which “are preserved in the cultural memory of the aliens (the local people)”.

Caves-sanctuaries where are practiced different rituals

These caves used to function as sanctuaries in different tomes are an object of rituals with different direction. A part of them are in the contemporary political boundaries of Bulgaria and others – in its historical borders.

Here we will look in details at some untypical examples of cult rituals and rites.

First, these are rites against natural disasters (drought, rainy weather, floods, hailstorms), respectively ceremonies for fertility. Near these caves is slaughtered a sacrificial animal at the feast of St. Spirit (for the Musomishka cave) and at the feast of St. Prophet Ieremia (for the Syarina cave). In the first case the horns and the bowels of the sacrifice are thrown in the cave and the meat is cooked a special meal – votive offering; in the second case with the blood of the animal is sprayed the vow stone in front of the cave and from the meat is cooked a stew. Interesting is also the magic ritual, which purpose is to heal sterility, practiced in front of the cave near the fortress Tzintzipares near the town of Perushtitsa, described by the archaeologist N. Dzambazov DZHAMBABOV (1958). In festive days there used to go childless women, accompanied by a young man – a youngest son of a large family. Above a natural stone block with horizontally drilled holes, the women leave offerings of round loaf, honey, khalva and other sweets.

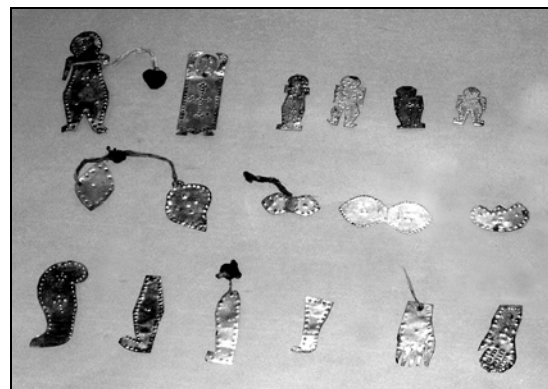


Fig.2. Obrutzi (votives) from the “St.Marna” Caves, Strandzha Mt., SE Bulgaria.

Here is necessary to draw the attention to the find in the cave Hambarcheto (The Small Granary), situated near vill. Brashlian, Malko Tarnovo region in South-East Bulgaria. In the far and very difficult to access end of the cave, were found 4 skulls of wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), lying in a line. The skulls are without lower jaw. According to the paleontologists, this is the first collective find of wild boar’s skulls in our caves. On the one of the skulls are found cuts made by a sharp object. The skulls’ age, defined by radio-carbon analysis, is 300 ± 45 years. In the people’s memory are not preserved any memories that this cave has ever been an object of some cult. The explorer of the cave ANTONOV (1977) states, that here used to be practiced a sacrifice or other ritual, probably left from the Thracian times and related to the cult of goddess Artemis. Based on other sources COOPER (1993) we could relate such cult also to the worshipping of Aphrodita, Demetra or Atalanta. There is no doubt that this cave used to be a bone deposit with magic-ritual purpose with parallels in the culture of the contemporary Arctic hunters ILIADE (1997). Based on Iliade, we think

the bones could be an offering to a supreme deity or they are preserved with the belief (popular among numerous cultures) that "the animal could be born anew from its bones".

Indisputable is that all sanctuaries are all these entirely natural caves, which are constituted into rock churches or churches are built inside.

At last, as a delicate exception from the accepted in the beginning principle, we would like to add to the caves-sanctuaries these caves, which beyond question are related to the life of some Bulgarian saints – St. Teodosii from Tarnovo, St. Patriarch Evtimii (both caves are situated near the town of Tarnovo, Central Bulgaria); St. st. Joakim Osogovski and Prochor Pshinski (now in Serbia). In and near these caves are not practiced any ritual actions, but in the mind of every Christian Bulgarian, they are sacred places, which deserve reverence.

The existing data show in general that the speleoatria aspect in the religious ideas has its continuity in our lands from the Neolithic age up to now. For sure the Bulgarians inherited this cultural tradition from the people, lived in the historical and the contemporary Bulgarian space in the past. After the Christian conversion, the worshipping of the caves inevitably receives a Christian nuance, but like many other rites, it has its pagan origin and content. Such stability of the ritual side of the religion together with the changing of the ideological content is almost a universal phenomenon TOKAREV (1964).

We suppose that the caves, described here are only a small part of all caves-sanctuaries in Bulgaria. The recent archaeological discoveries promise new and interesting findings in the future. But in the people's memory already have faded away many bright strokes of the cult practice, which used to be alive 50, 20, or even 10 years ago and under the pressure of our dynamic time they will disappear faster and completely ANTONOV (1981). An unequivocal confirmation of this statement is the fact that of all caves, worshipped by the Bulgarians, today people practice cult rituals only in few caves – the cave St. Marina in the place Likudi and the cave St. Petka near the town of Trun, the cave of St. Ivan of Rila near vill. Scrino, etc. Everything that happened in the rest of the caves-sanctuaries is now only a memory in the people's mind and is kept only as information in our academic and popular literature.

4. Conclusion

The exploration of the caves-sanctuaries in Bulgaria is an interdisciplinary problem for speleologists, ethnologists, folklore researchers, archaeologists. A profound study of these interesting objects belonging to our not only national, but world cultural heritage is possible only in a spirit of cooperation among the representatives of such different spheres of human knowledge. Only then we could keep the data about ancient rituals, practiced in the caves-sanctuaries. The sites themselves need also to be preserved by applying an adequate protection policy (at national and international level), which they deserve as an important part of our national and world cultural heritage.

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